

## **New Basford—a visual typographic terrain**

*Alison Barnes and Joseph F. McCullagh  
Nottingham Trent University, UK*

Typography is to language what maps are to geography...' (Baines & Haslam 2002:10)

The origins of the project are found within a series of *dérives* within New Basford, Nottingham, England. New Basford is an inner city area of Nottingham with a mix of residential and commercial property. The area developed during the mid to late nineteenth century through the expansion of the lace trade. The first house was built in 1820 and the parish formed in 1847. The majority of housing is traditional small Victorian terraces built originally for the lace workers, though there are some larger suburban villas scattered throughout the area, particularly to the southwest.

This project builds on previous work instigated from the area, which focused on mapping non-traditional elements, such as graffiti and memories, in an attempt to develop maps from which the user can gain a deeper sense of the area, its inhabitants and its social history.

Graffiti writers scratch their messages into doorways or grab a marker pen and scrawl their texts on a lamppost. They have, for the most part, no eye for beauty, simply a desire to make their mark, to tell their story with their own truth. However, theirs is a story that is rarely heard, one that is removed from the public places they fill, as if blank sheets to spread their narratives. Instead the story we hear is that of the 'up and coming area' that offers 'excellent opportunities for first time buyers' and is a 'vibrant, multi cultural part of the inner city'.

This new work investigates typography specifically through the creation of the 'New Basford' font family as a way of extending our understanding of text/writing in the urban landscape. Our work allows the reader/user to interact with the specific location and the typo/graphic data via the language of typography. We have developed a 'typographic experience' that will tell both sides of the story—allowing the reader/user to travel 'within' the space through their screen, offering a voice to the silent spaces of the territory and yielding new associations. We are inviting the reader/user to utilise the given narratives, but in doing so creating new narratives—retelling stories and reading between the lines. The work offers a further reading of the graffiti writers through typographic intervention, referencing typographic and literary traditions such as concrete poetry and automatic writing, and engaging with some of the most contentious debates on the subject of typography.

Landscape is often referred to in terms of a palimpsest. The palimpsest was a medieval writing block, mostly used in ecclesiastical circles, that was reused time and time again, with each inscription being erased and another written over it. The motive for making palimpsests seems to have been largely economic – reusing parchment was cheaper than preparing new skin. Another motive may have been directed by the desire of Church officials to 'convert' pagan Greek script by overlaying it with the word of God. The earlier inscriptions would never quite be totally erased, so the result was a build up of the sum of all the inscriptions – an analogy that can be applied to the way in which landscape is continually written and rewritten by the inhabitants and their lives (Crang 1998:22). In the context of this project some of the graffiti could be seen to be written by a particular 'speech community' (Bloomfield 1935:42) as it uses very particular types of slang that are not part of our 'official language' (Bourdieu 1991:45). This represents a reversal of the Palimpsest—we are interested in the representation of the hidden unofficial texts, by 'converting' the official texts through typography.

Michel de Certeau drew many analogies between the city, its inhabitants and their movements and the practice of writing and speaking. He saw the inhabitants of the city as 'writing an urban text' as they move through the city (de Certeau 1984:97). The analogies of text or speech could easily be dismissed by those seeking a scientific basis for their work, however this way of thinking about landscape can open up areas of research that are not quantifiable. A very literal example is that of stories. Often stories or myths about a place become part of its very fabric, giving one a 'sense of place'.

Place, it seems is somehow different to space. Space seems to refer simply to an abstract geometry, something empty. Place, on the other hand, implies some sense of belonging, ownership or at least some kind of inhabitation.

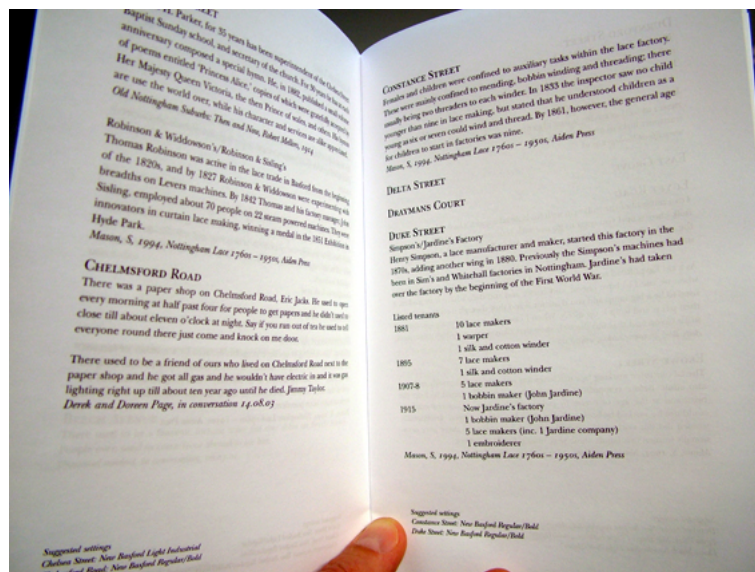
'A house that has been experienced is not an inert box ... inhabited space transcends geometrical space.' (Bachelard 1994:vii)

It could be said then that place is a living space, brought to life by its inhabitants. How then does one develop a sense of place? Places are not simply a collection of buildings, and accumulated data, they involve people, and human interaction. This interaction allows us to develop an attachment to place, and creates a 'genius loci' – a unique spirit of place (Crang 1998:108)

Our primary means of 'reading' the landscape is traditionally a map, where there is little opportunity for interaction. Most are used pragmatically, simply to get us from a to b, focusing on the geometry of the road system and surrounding buildings. There is little or no 'sense of place' to be drawn from a series of motorway junctions, roads and roundabouts.

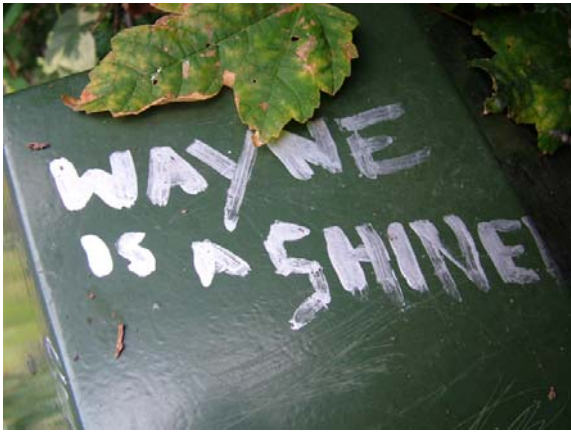
This project will draw you into a typographic terrain. One that tells stories of forgotten histories and memories, and one that will, through interaction, present new tales of the space, thus developing your understanding of the area and your 'sense of place'.

To begin to create the typographic terrain of New Basford, the reader/user is presented with two elements: a book and a font family. The book content is traditionally set in justified ITC New Baskerville for continuous reading. It contains the first layer of diverse material sourced from many genres and media comprising of narratives, anecdotes, oral histories, and factual information drawn from newspapers, websites, and books.



They begin to give a picture of New Basford's history and community pieced together in the form of the book offering multiple textual interpretations. The content directly relates to the streets and roads of New Basford where the typographic data was found. The book carries the 'official' narratives, and it is only through interaction with the New Basford font, that the 'unofficial' narratives are revealed.

The 'form' of the book structurally references chapbooks. Chapbooks were small and inexpensive, often containing poems or stories, sold by 'chapmen' for a penny who hawked them door to door. They were the main recreational reading matter for the adult poor and children of all classes in the eighteenth century and were largely responsible in this period for keeping alive and transmitting traditional fairy tales, folklore, and nursery rhymes, and they served as a welcome alternative to the moralistic and didactic pamphlets of the time.



The font family of New Basford was created from the initial *dérive* of graffiti gathered and investigated on location. The graffiti ranged from what we defined as New Basford 'industrial light' consisting of basic graffiti 'tags' to New Basford 'heavy' consisting of aggressive, and even abusive graffiti. This reflects the changing nature, the ongoing palimpsest of the area dating back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Helvetica Neue was adapted in Fontographer with the graffiti replacing a range of 'official' characters from each weight. Helvetica Neue was chosen as its range of functional, adaptable weights coincided with the range needed for the New Basford family, its ubiquitous nature gives the graffiti a universality, and conceptually the visual contrast of the book set in historical Baskerville contrasts with the contemporary now in the form of Helvetica.

The gasworks used to smell terrible. We used to go down there for the coke for the fires.

The gasworKEISHA WOZ EREs used to sMandRwoz airell terriBecca 4?le. We used to go downNOEL IS GREAT there for the coKEISHA WOZ EREe for the fires.

Tom is fithe **GIRLS TOES**asuck meworksuck me  
usuck mee**DILDO** to smell terrible. We used to go down  
there **fuck me bitchor the CUTE FEET**oke  
**fuck me bitchor the fuck me bitchI SUCK**resuck me.

The New Basford font family allows you to de-construct the text to form further readings. It engages you to open up a dialogue with the physical space of New Basford in typographic terms. The interaction takes place through the utilisation of the font weights within the New Basford family. One is asked to re-set the original book text using a particular weight, or combination of weights. The font begins to reveal traces of an alternative narrative, left by the graffiti writers of the area. We explore the terrain virtually, with the font giving access to place. The blank screen becomes a street; the letter becomes a door. Like the street graffiti there is no official system or order that we comprehend, therefore leading us to fragmented words on the screen. The contextual font is pre-text ready, to be cut-up in the manner of Tristan Tzara, all within a low-fi technological approach.

The palimpsest as screen enables us to re-read and re-write text creating a second, third, and fourth writing, and so on, re-inscribing texts. Through the presence and simultaneously the absence of the text we make a reading of the original text. This clearly relates to graffiti where we see the erasing of previous texts layered into new ones, additions, subtractions that are perhaps, as Derrida has said 'sous rature' or 'under erasure'. The writing of words under erasure is one of Derrida's methods for using the words that he questions but is forced to use (Derrida (Spivak) 1976:viii-xiv). New forms emerge out of the origin, it represents the origin of the word, but it is only something that it is not. As in the street the urban texts shift and are constantly changing and evolving. We try to understand the culture of the graffiti writer's urban language.

We are investigating writing and reading typographically, thus becoming new writers in addressing how we read through a loaded text. You are simultaneously the writer, reader, author and designer of the visual terrain, as the text is transformed and the space is deconstructed through the 'destabilising' of the given copy.

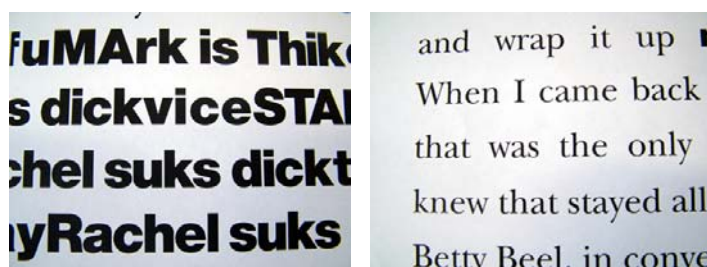
As Barthes said...

'a text is made up of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.' (Barthes 1977:148)

Barthes questions the intentions of the author and the sources of meaning. He sees an active role of the reader who creates meaning through a textual analysis, and an active process. Meaning does not reside with the author. Is our role as typographer to enable this to take place? What is our role and our intervention?

As you explore the text, moving from (ITC) New Baskerville to New Basford and back again you lose yourself within language and the font enables an automatic writing whereby you instantly become the narrator evolving the narrative further. The graffiti comes into view and you are reminded that you are back on a street. The street/sentence elicits traces of the original text. You constantly try to understand the syntax that unfolds. The text shifts between the signifier and the signified, allowing interplay of design and simultaneous writing/designing of the landscape, leading us into the visual typographic terrain where language and meaning collide. The narrative unfolds and you become fascinated as history mixes with the now and time is unraveled through what becomes visible on the screen.

New Basford Heavy becomes uncomfortable reading as you explore further revealing the layers of text. You then try to search for an alternative or the real truth by selecting the safety of Baskerville returning to the original text/space.



The touch of a character dramatically moves our understanding from aggression to beauty in just one sentence/street. As you write the text traces itself like a palimpsest over the screen, you become lost in the 'texts' and you lose control of the meaning. The text is left to tell its own truth. You travel through the spaces of New Basford through writing and typographic interaction. You sometimes indulge your morbid fascination and become engaged in reading, writing and designing simultaneously and get lost in the pleasure of the text. You become the 'wreader' through both reading and creating the text by the unveiling of hidden texts. To quote Bruce Mau,



'for the viewer something happens and for the reader another thing happens. We (as designers) in fact, become readers ourselves, to make these things happen.' (Mau 2003:33)

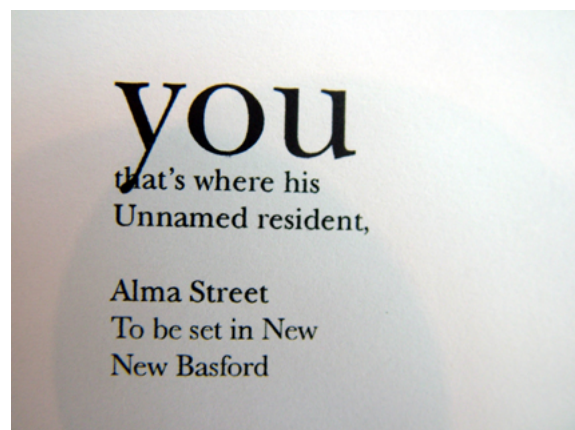
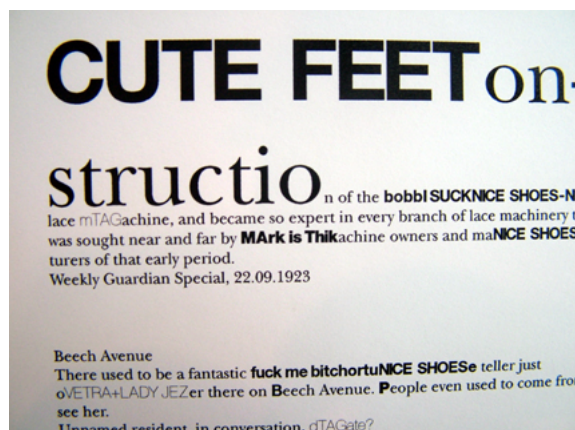
The notion of the 'viewer as reader' is subtle but can lead us into exciting areas for typographic design. 'but if you consider the viewer as a reader, you can structure the work in a very different way; you can open the space beneath the page.' (Mau 2003:35)

In interpreting the work through the interaction the wreader plays with fact and fiction, creating new fictions, factions, meta-fictions or even meta-factions. You are in essence a person writing about the work by taking part in the work. The typographic intervention enables the piece to become more multi-dimensional, suggesting a more non-sequential understanding of the space. 'It is about the jump from one thing to another, the spaces that are left open. It is not about filling every last bit; it's about opening spaces. (Mau 2003:34)

'Authorship' became a main pre-occupation of design theorists particularly in the 90's (Rock 1996:44) and Barthes in his essay Death of the author, ends by saying that 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author' (Barthes 1977:148). This essay continually surprises us to this day. We want the reader/designer through active textual analysis and practice/processes to engage further within the text. As in Tristram Shandy we try to unravel the text and are open to the lexias as we try to understand the role of the reader and designer.

Lexia is a term used by Barthes to describe elements that can take on various meanings for various readers throughout the text. He describes this as the difference between the writerly text, in which the reader is active in a creative process, and a readerly text in which they are restricted to just reading. Barthes concludes that an ideal text is one that is reversible, or open to the greatest variety of independent interpretations and not restrictive in meaning. We are interested in the distinctions between the readerly and writerly and the notion of the 'wreader' from a typographic viewpoint 'the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text'. (Barthes 1973:4)

Drawing on the notion of designer as author, one becomes aware of new possibilities, forging and enhancing new interpretations, thus forming new lexias of meaning by crafting the elements. Through interaction we become a reader of the text/space. The font allows the wreader to become an active participant, the relationship between author and reader has transformed; the text is not fixed.



Our work investigates how the designer/reader engages further in the text by developing a visual rhetoric of their own, thus repositioning the work. On the notion of authenticity as designers 'we tend to judge integrity by the rhetoric used' (Newark 2002:76). For this project we are playing with rhetoric whereby 'rhetoric must also be concerned with imagination, with form-giving, and with appropriate use of language to facilitate all forms of social interaction' (Newark 2002:76). The text is 'a tissue, a woven fabric' (Barthes 1977:159) and we manipulate the words but do they make sense semantically, do they have to make sense? As designers we try to classify, organize text and information by default or do we indulge in the

arbitrary nature of things. As designers we cannot help ourselves, we have to craft the text. What is the effective interpretation (semantics) and what is the right interpretation (rhetoric) (Newark 2002:72). We want the reader to openly question the 'intention' of the given text and for the designer to 'interpret' the text typographically.

The font could be misconstrued as a text generator or a typeface. We are interested in the ideas of authorship as proposed by Mermoz, he refers to 'a mutation into a new form of authorship and new text-objects in which the text (referred to in its structuralist sense) and its graphic materialisation – what we might call the body of the text – mutually enhance and challenge each other' (Mermoz 1998:36).

Through this interpretation and typographic interaction the image becomes concrete, forming a design as one engages with the space. It no longer becomes text but it generates a typographic image of the space. Here the work begins to allude to theories developed through the study of concrete poetry.

'Concrete poetry deals with the relation between the visible form and the intellectual substance of words. It is visual not because it would apply images but because it adds the optical gesture of the word to its semantic meaning - as completion, expansion, or negation. The intermedial aspect does not lie in the change of the medium but in the change of *perception*, from the semiotic system of *reading* typical for literature to the semiotic system of *viewing* typical for art.' (Simanowski 2003)

Through interaction the layers of text build up and we develop a typographic understanding through both reading and viewing the space and content. Our understanding of the space becomes enhanced and we start to form new relationships with traces of the terrain. The work starts to take on the form of an installation within the page and leads us to engage in an event, where text is 'seen' and read. We become engaged where 'the characteristics of the text inform the graphic thinking process' and 'the work emerges from the text' (Mau 2003:33).



The work deals with concepts of the role of the reader/user, writer and designer. The use of the font allows the reader to reveal the underlying context of environment, moving from a 'unilinear' decoding of the message in understanding reading of the text to a 'multilinear' reading process (Mermoz 1998:25). This project opens up the possibilities of understanding a physical space typographically as we travel virtually through the screen.

The project looks at re-presentation of the landscape and how as typographers we deal with this and construct new terrains and further references through form and content. History through the texts re-writes itself and the work plays with ambiguities. The reader filters the text to find the meaning and attempts to make sense of the syntax as they incorporate the New Basford font into the landscape/body of the text creating their own visual rhetoric.

As Barthes said...

'As soon as a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins' (Barthes 1977:142).

Through the project we realize that we become visual typographic narrators, authors and visual researchers of the space New Basford. We are interested in 'how typography might help to develop alternative communication strategies and new forms of textuality' (Mermoz 1998:25). The work offers a basis for further investigations of this nature. We have explored the notion of graphic design as research in its own right and have developed typographic research tools to gain a further understanding of urban environments. We have interrogated the subject by establishing critical and visual design theories through practical investigation and the methodology of action research. We have engaged in research 'through and into' the practice of graphic design (Frayling 1993:5).

We have investigated writing, reading, and associated technology. We to this end are driven in 'disrupting the conventions of narrative and the transparency of writing' through 'typographic decisions [that] are not independent from, but structurally related to, the strategy of the text. It is not from gazing at the page, but from reading the text that typography reveals its functionalities' (Mermoz 1998:25). We try to move from a simple decoding to a further enhanced reading of New Basford. Typography gives visible form to language; it is the oft-ignored liminal space between landscape and its description, author and reader. This paper and associated design work propose that typography can play an active part in communicating a sense of place and that, with interaction, the reader can engage in the process of writing thus becoming at once the reader, writer (or should we say 'wreader') and the designer.

### **Bibliography**

- Bachelard, G, 1994, *The Poetics of Space*, Boston, Mass, Beacon Press  
Baines, P & Haslam, A, 2002, *Type and Typography*, London, Laurence King  
Barthes, R, 1977, *Image, Music, Text*, London, Fontana  
Barthes, R, 1973, *s/z*, London, Basil Blackwell  
Baseline, Issue 25, 1998  
Baseline, Issue 43, 2003  
Bloomfield, L, 1935, *Language*, London, Allen & Unwin  
Bourdieu, P, 1991, *Language and Symbolic Power*, London, Basil Blackwell  
Crang, 1998, *Cultural Geography*, London, Routledge  
De Certeau, M, 1984, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkely, UCP  
Derrida, J, 1976, *Of Grammatology*, London. John Hopkins University Press.  
Eye, Issue 46, 1996  
Frayling, C, 1993, 'Research in Art and Design' in *Royal College of Art Research Papers*, Volume 1, No. 1  
Newark, Q, 2002, *What is Graphic Design*, Hove, Rotovision  
Simanowski, R, 2003, *Concrete Poetry in Analog and Digital Media*, at [http://www.dichtung-digital.org/2003/parisconnection/concret poetry.htm#\\_ftn1](http://www.dichtung-digital.org/2003/parisconnection/concret poetry.htm#_ftn1)